I had the opportunity to interview Gary a number of years back, when I worked at CGM. I very much enjoyed talking to him, and it was fascinating to hear the history of D&D and gaming in general from his perspective. Like many people here, I've been a D&D geek for ages; I thought others might be interested to read what he had to say about the history of it all.

—Ben Sones, 2008-03-04

It's fairly common knowledge that D&D owes its origins to the International Federation of Wargaming and the Chainmail rules; tell me a bit about how all that got started. What was Chainmail?

The IFW was co-founded by Bill Speer, Scott Duncan and I… oh, I don't know, I've lost track—'63 probably? I said you know, let's do a real organization, instead of one of these 'conquer the world' things. You know, 'we'll beat you at D-Day, and then we own the United States,' or whatever. So we put together and had this organization. I was initially the secretary—I don't really know what I was, really—but we got up to about 600 or 700 people. Which isn't bad considering that in those days there weren't any computers around. Had there been computers and the Internet, we would have been much larger.

Was that mostly based in the US?

Actually we had a fair number of foreign members… mostly English speaking, though. It was US, Canada, the UK, and so forth. We did a magazine, but that aside, there were interest groups within the IFW, and mine was the Castle and Crusade Society. One of the things I did was I published a set of 1:20—one figure equals twenty men—rules for medieval wargames, that I developed from some rules originally written by Jeff Perren. To that I added 1:1 rules, where one figure was one man, and I also added a set of jousting rules, and we published that Lake Geneva Tactical Studies Association Medieval Military Miniatures rules.

[We added] a fantasy supplement that had heroes and superheroes—heroes had four dice instead of being 'fourth level,' and superheroes had eight dice instead of being 'eighth level,' and wizards were basically two dice guys who could throw fireballs and lightning bolts and so forth. In fact for a long time, the burst radius of the wizard's fireball was the burst circle for a catapult, and the lightning bolt was very much like the old cannons used in medieval warfare. So we would use the regular military miniatures rules for the spells. That was published in 1971 by Guidon Games as the Chainmail medieval military miniatures rules with a fantasy supplement. That fantasy supplement was the tail that wagged the dog.

So that was really the inspiration for Dungeons & Dragons?

Oh, absolutely—no question about it. As I said, a hero in D&D is fourth level, a hero in Chainmail has four hit dice. All I did with the armor class (and this is why the armor classes in D&D are a little strange) is I reversed the armor classes in Chainmail. Of course Chainmail used a bell curve—it used 2d6—to determine hits, then we went to a d20. We used numbered chits—basically poker chips. Then in a school supply catalog I discovered the Platonic solids… numbered, yet. And I said 'aha!' We now have 4- and 8-

sided, and 12- and 20-sided dice. Gaming had a breakthrough.

How did you get from Chainmail to the Dungeons & Dragons?

A lot of miniatures wargames that I would do on the tabletop, for example, I would say 'okay, you're the Viking chief. Here's a map of the area, here's the hill fort, here's the local thane's castle, here's the abbey. Where do you want to land, where are you going to raid?' And then another copy of the map would be given to you as the thane, or as the commander of the hill fort, or as the abbot. So everybody was playing a singular role, and all the other men were theirs to command. This is a concept that came through in Dungeons & Dragons as hirelings.

So we were playing this game where you are this guy, right there, and if he got killed, it was over. Why we personified them to that depth, the game went a long way into exploring the subterranean world. Then it started to become a matter of whether you had a sword or an axe, and a backpack, and rope and spikes and all these spelunking tools… That was Dave's main thing—Dave Arneson—to start as a zero level hero and go from there.

I had mines and counter-mines in Chainmail. You know, when you're doing it on a tabletop, though, you still can't dig under the sand; you have to use paper and pencil for that. So Dave said 'look at this, I'm running this campaign," and I said 'well look at that—I think you have something there.' So I went to work and wrote Dungeons & Dragons.

So even the wargames that you were running had a lot of role-playing elements in them?

Have you ever played Diplomacy? To put yourself in the role of the Kaiser, or the arch-duke, or the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and so forth… there was always a little role-playing in most miniatures games, and in Diplomacy. I always enjoyed writing press releases more than working out the moves.

How similar is the current standard of role-playing to what you originally envisioned in the first D&D rules set? How has it evolved?

Those are all such niche markets. Pretensions aside, there's only two games that pretty much dominate. You have new Dungeons & Dragons, which is pretty much hack-and-slash power gaming, and Vampire, which is the only LARP (Live Action Role-Playing game). Between them there's the bulk of all role-playing.

[With Vampire], I think the guy who did it thought it would be a good way to meet girls. [laughs] It's the only game that has a big female audience. I doubt that you have more than a 5% female audience in most role-playing games. I have no real handle on what Vampire has, but from most groups I've seen, I'd say it's closer to 50/50. It's pretty impressive.

Do some of the directions that people have taken role-playing games surprise you?

I think that it's very interesting. To me, to say that a role-playing game is all story is nonsense. If it's all about the story, pick up a darned book and read it. The story comes after the play; you don't know what the story is going to be until that particular episode is finished. Then you can tell the story. But until then it isn't the Master directing the players in little roles—that's called theater. It's the players impacting the environment, and the base story that has brought them there, and then creating a story from there. To do that, you need lots of things. Which of those you choose to emphasize is strictly up to the group, but a good role-playing game should allow you to emphasize any particular aspect that your group wants to use. It could be politics and intrigue, or it could be hack and slash—that is the most popular. It might be basic problem solving. It could be just about anything that you'd normally use in real life to complete what the task is, or try to complete it.

It seems to me that if anything, rather than "role-playing" being the most important, role assumption is the most important. That is to put yourself into the shoes of that make-believe character and try to think and act as would that person. That doesn't mean you have to stand and give a soliloquy to bore the other players with, but to be acting and thinking "in-game."

Making decisions based on your character's motivations.

Right. Part of it is good play, and I don't think that good play mandates that you be a Shakespearian actor, but it does mean that you need to think cleverly for that person. SO if that character is somewhat stupid, you act that way, and if they are supposed to be clever, you do that. And each time you play the game with a different persona, you act differently. It's demanding.

There are many interesting twists, though. For a while I was getting one to two emails a week about 'how can I market this new role-playing I've got.' And I'd say 'look, I've done consulting work on games, and I charge $50 per hour based on a ten-hour advance.' But my advice is forget it. There are too many of them out there, and you have virtually no chance. The market is overcrowded, distributors don't want your game, and retailers don't want another product on their shelves that nobody knows about. Look to see what you can do online.

There are quite a few freeware role-playing games on the Internet these days…

Right. And they're worth every penny you pay for them. I mean, there are really only two basic approaches that you can take. One is the archetype class system, and the other is the skill-based system. And permutations thereof. My new game, Lejendary Adventure, is a skill-based system. It's a rules-light system, so I've lumped certain skills together and said 'well, if you already know this, then go ahead.' Then I've created certain "orders," so if you have this ability and this ability and this ability, you are recognized as a mage, or a warrior, or whatever. So you get the archetypes too. I'm trying to cheat and use both approaches, but ultimately there are just the two basic types.

So it's less about the rules and more about the type of game that you build around them?

Yeah, right. There are only so many mechanics that you can use. A game is just mechanics and presentation, and presentation is probably the most important thing. Does it really matter if you roll a d20, or a d100, or 3d6… anyone can figure out the probabilities. All you're doing is generating random numbers.

Those people who say 'I don't want any randomness in my game' just aren't living in the real world, because you don't know whether or not it's going to rain tomorrow. The weather people don't. They're what? 85% or 90%, right? Hey, that's life. Accidents happen. Good fortune, bad fortune, that's what random number generation and chance are all about. You slip and fall. Whoops.

It's far more arbitrary in a game system to not have that opportunity, to say 'everyone who comes into this room slips and falls. ' Or to say 'you never fall'—that's also arbitrary. Now I don't like those games where you have to roll to do everything… I remember one game where a guy had a dice box with ten compartments, and he'd shake it up and go down the line to check and see if all these things would happen. And I said 'oh boy, this is truly a game of chance; there's not much skill involved at all.' So I think it's in response to that sort of thing that some of the diceless games came about. But it seems kind of like 'move-less chess' to me.

In computer games, it's all about dungeon crawls and combat, and they're hugely popular. The same is true in paper games. Everybody loves the real horrible dungeon crawls rife with combat and death.

Like Tomb of Horrors, or Keep on the Borderland?

Keep on the Borderland was a module where I said 'I'm not trying to get any realism or verisimilitude going here; I'm going for pure whimsy fantasy action, and you're going to be kept amused every minute.' I still get emails from people saying 'yeah, that was great.' I ran a game for the Dungeons & Dragons 25th anniversary, and I had players dying in droves because they had forgotten how to dungeon crawl.

In October of 1973, you formed Tactical Studies Rules with Don Kaye…

After GenCon that year we formed a partnership, Don and I, and we published Cavaliers and Roundheads: Rules for the English Civil War, by Jeff Perren and Gary Gygax. We knew that wasn't really our hottest prospect, but it was all we could afford to put out. And then as that sold we were building towards getting enough money to do Dungeons & Dragons.

Did Dave Arneson have a role in the company?

No. He basically gave us concepts, but I wrote the whole of the game by myself. With a lot of input from a bunch of guys, of course. In there I had a list of all the guys who contributed ideas.

But he was doing some "dungeon crawl" wargaming at the time?

Absolutely, and he's credited as co-creator for his contributions.

So the first rules set—the three-book boxed set—was published in 1974?

Yes, January of 1974.

Did it take off right away?

Boy, we thought so. In about ten months we'd sold 1,000 copies. They were flying out the door. We had thought it was going to do well, because everyone liked the Chainmail fantasy. We didn't have any advertising, though—I think we ran a few little business card-sized ads in a few publications, but basically it was all word of mouth. We got the new order of 2,000 in November of 1974, and that took about five months to sell through. So it was going at a rate that I was really pretty satisfied with.

It was just so much work. Then Don died in January of 1975, and I said 'whoa, this is just way too much work.' So Heritage Models said that they had a new printing operation, and they said they'd print up 3,000 copies, and keep 300 of them to cover their printing expenses. Hey! What a deal, right? So we did that, and those went out the door in about three months. At that point the word was finally getting around, and I was publishing the Strategic Review, and I said 'okay, we've got to get a magazine, and we'll call it Dragon.' So we started to do our own advertising that way.

Then Brian Blume came on board in, what? 1975?

Yeah, he came on board… I think in January of 1975. I can't remember whether it was January or December of 1974… I guess it was December. He bought in as an equal partner, and thus we financed the production of Dungeons & Dragons.

1975 was a busy year—you published the Greyhawk and Blackmoor supplements, and the Dungeon! Board game…

That was David Megarry's game. I was Dave's agent for a while, and I tried to get Avalon Hill to publish it. When they didn't I said to Dave 'don't worry, we'll do it, because we'll have enough money now.' It was a good fun game, but it was a pain in the neck to pick up and put away, which I think was it's main drawback. All those little cards… setup and takedown was horrible. We still play—I have a full set here. That came around the same time that Dave Arneson was telling me about his dungeon crawl campaign. Dungeon! was really just an underground scenario for the Chainmail game.

Boot Hill was that year, too, right?

Oh yeah, Don Kaye had been wanting to do that, so Brian and I took over and did Boot Hill. It was originally just a little rulebook, and then the whole boxed set came out.

Dungeons & Dragons was expanding quickly. Did you know in what direction you wanted to take the game at that point?

Oh, yeah. I told Brian that we had a real problem in 1976. The game rules were so open to interpretation; there were three groups at Stanford who wouldn't even talk to each other. They all played, and one group thought 'let's go slowly and do a lot of role-playing.' One group was a killer dungeon group, where you rolled up a new character two or three times a night, I guess. And the other one was a 'Monte Haul' type of campaign. And I thought that we should try to get something that would be a little more… quantified. We needed an advanced game, and I said 'there you go!' Advanced Dungeons & Dragons.

There was also a new Basic set, though, which replaced the original boxed set.

John Eric Holmes—Dr. Holmes—contacted me. His son played, and he was like 'you know, I'd really like to clean up Dungeons & Dragons. And I said 'that's good, but I'm working on an advanced game. Why don't you pass the stuff through me?' So as he passed the stuff through me, he organized the basic rules, and then I passed on the stuff that I was working into Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, so there would be a smoother transition between the two, in case somebody wanted to switch from one to the other.

So you launched two separate product lines? Were you afraid that would confuse people?

No. I've always had lots of respect for gamers, and I though they'd instantly be able to look at one and the other and decide what they wanted to do. There are still people who just play original Dungeons & Dragons. I think it was a mistake—and the Blumes were running the company then—to kill the Basic line. It played differently, it was a different game than Advanced Dungeons & Dragons.

Was it more entry level?

No, I thought it was less structured, and you could do whatever you wanted with it. Advanced Dungeons & Dragons kind of pushed you along certain paths with the alignment rules and so forth. It was restrictive in many ways, where Dungeons & Dragons wasn't. It was just different… not as different as Empire of the Petal Throne—M.A.R. Barker's game. I didn't think it was a direct competitor. It was just another approach to gaming; I don't think it took away from the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons games at all.

What was the first adventure module that you published?

G1: The Stedding of the Hill Giant Chief. G1, G2, and G3 I wrote at the same time, and they were all published together. After I wrote the Player's Handbook I was tired of writing rules, so I took a break and

wrote those adventures. Then after I wrote the Dungeon Master's Guide, I then wrote the Decent Into the Depths of the Earth, Shrine of the Kuo-Toa, and Vault of the Drow. Then I was kind of burned out, and Dave Sullivan did most of the work on Q1: Queen of the Demonweb Pits.

Did any of these adventure modules develop from games that you were running?

Well, I made the stuff up and played it, then everybody said 'yeah, this is fun,' and I revised it a bit and published it. Lawrence Schick's White Plume Mountain was what he submitted when I had call out for adventure module designers. Dave Cook did the Slave Lords modules, and I think those were drawn directly from their game. Keep on the Borderlands I just made up out of whole cloth, though. Brian said that we needed a new adventure module for the Basic set, something with a little more action, and a little broader and so forth. So I just sat down and wrote that in three weeks.

What is your favorite adventure module?

About a year ago I was playing in the Glacial Rift of the Frost Giant Jarl, and I'd forgotten everything, and damn if I didn't get into the cave where everything is slippery and dropped a +2 shield down a crevasse, and it was lost. Then I got to laughing and said 'god, I'm mean and awful.' This is just hideous. I think the ones that had the most fun with were the 'G' series—writing them and playing them. Then there's the Vault of the Drow, where the Drow vampire and the succubus are on the island where it's all illusionary, and there's a big crevasse around it, and you'd try to get up on the steps and down you'd go. Plunge 200 feet to your death, or whatever. That was a lot of fun.

What's the most entertaining character that you've ever played?

Oh, definitely the one I like the best is my mage, Mordenkainen. He's always been a lot of fun to play. Mordenkainen's Fantastic Adventure, which Rob Kuntz wrote, is a somewhat altered and refined account of an actual adventure that he was on. Poor Mordenkainen, he got turned to stone that time out by that filthy golem with a whip of cockatrice feathers. Fortunately he was rescued, but I was near distraction at the time, because meanwhile Bigby was poisoned and failed his save and died.

Sometimes it's not just the absolute setting—if you have a good game master, any dull place can be made into a lot of fun. The important thing is that the players all have a good attitude, and are there to enjoy themselves, and the game master is good… well, you can have fun with almost anything.

Is there anything in the original Dungeons & Dragons rules that you wish you had done differently?

Well, I think the thing that bothers me the most is in the Basic game, well, it's fine the way it is. It's easily mutable. In Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, I should have perhaps been a little more careful in explaining how to use alignment. It isn't something one wears like a badge. Otherwise no, I think everyone really had a good time. I think the spirit and the soul of the game were good.

The other thing I would have done was to design it a little differently to facilitate, more easily, the expansion into other genres.

Aside from fantasy?

Yeah. I was trying to revise Advanced Dungeons & Dragons—I started thinking about that in '83—but I didn't get to it. But had I revised it there probably would have been a few little changes in the way that one made one's characters, so that character could easily go into other role-playing genres and be used.

I was a little more careful with Dangerous Journeys, and much more so now with Lejendary Adventure. We have a genre expansion up online, created for a Victorian Steampunk type of thing. Fantastical science. It basically works well with the same sort of systems, and you can transfer your avatar from the Lejendary Adventure world. I have several people working on other genre expansions, so we can do science fiction or horror or whatever, using about 90% of the core system from Lejendary Adventure.

I have to ask about B3: Palace of the Silver Princess…

Oh, yeah. Jean Wells.

It was the first Dungeons & Dragons module written by a woman, right?

Uh-huh. I hired Jean.

Then it was released and recalled in the same day…

Yeah, it really was just a tempest in a teapot. I was no longer in control of the creative department. Had TSR not made a fuss about it, I think it would have passed largely unnoticed. There were a couple of questionable things in it… the person who pulled some of them out of the dumpster really made out. They're going now for really high prices, but I think most of the people who get them are really disappointed because there's nothing really very wrong in the thing.

I saw one auction on eBay last week for about $500.

[laughs]

Then there was the FBI raid on the TSR offices…

I tried my best to get a little press on that thing. We had a corner building here that we were using as an office—it's now the Landmark Center in Lake Geneva—it was an old three story building that had been a hotel, and we transformed it. The bottom floor was the Dungeon Hobby Shop and so forth, and our offices were up above. About that time we were playtesting Top Secret, and we threw the orders out at

the end of the day. Some busybody picked something out of the trash… the people who were writing Top Secret were really good, and the wording was really believable, and this person said 'oh my god, it looks like somebody is plotting an assassination!' So they took it to the local police, who then turned it over to the FBI.

Well, the FBI was very red in the face when they found out that this was just a game called Top Secret. It's an espionage game, and everybody's playing a secret agent… and they were just like 'oh, god.' I really wanted the press to pick that story up, but they didn't. That's all it was—some orders from a game that got passed on to the police.

As Dungeons & Dragons got more popular, it started to attract more serious detractors—especially among religious groups. What was your first exposure to that?

Back in 1980… I've forgotten what the group was, but they had a magazine called Cornerstone, that actually published an interview with me, and it was pretty decent. They of course were saying 'demons and so forth, how can you deal with demons?' Well, I told them the demons in this game are as real as the gold or the swords or the magical spells. Magical spells? It's all make-believe. There aren't any dragons, there aren't any demons.

They said 'well the Bible says…' and I said "hey—this is just a game.' They were the only religious group that ever contacted me. They did a fair interview, and it was in Cornerstone in… well, 1978 or 1979, I don't remember. They have their point of view, and it's a religious belief and you can't argue with it. I thought they were fair.

Those people aren't going to buy Dungeons & Dragons anyway. I thought it was a terrible mistake when the woman running TSR decided to take out the demons and devils—sales didn't go up, they went down. It's just ridiculous, people who can't separate game fantasy from reality, or from their religion… well, they aren't going to be playing the game anyway.

There was also the book by Rona Jaffe—the one that got turned into a TV movie.

Oh, god, yeah. Mazes and Monsters. I have a copy of the book. It's a dreadful potboiler, and there's more fantasy in that book than there is in the Dungeons & Dragons game.

It all came about when James Dallas Egbert III disappeared. The private detective, to gain some notoriety and fame, claimed that he was lost in the steam tunnels, playing live Dungeons & Dragons. Of course now live action role-playing is more prominent, and you know, kids still play cops and robbers and stuff like that. Maybe they did play Dungeons & Dragons in the steam tunnels. Unlikely, though—it wouldn't be much of a game. They can't do a fantasy film with special effects good enough to do justice to what you can imagine in your head, with someone there to serve as game master. It was his disappearance that really began to get the yellow journalists on to the game. Before that we'd had some very nice press.

Then Pat Pulling's son committed suicide, and she blamed it on Dungeons & Dragons. After saying in a newspaper interview, as I recall, 'well, he'd been playing the game for two years, and I didn't know about it.' I said 'well, there's the reason.' What parent doesn't know that their kid is doing for two years? There's clearly a lack of parental attention. From what I can see, she transferred the guilt from her lack of parental supervision to the game. There's another person who never bothered to call me or talk to me or anything.

As for trying to link the Dungeons & Dragons game with Satanism… well, I don't know any Satanists, and I don't really think there's much of a cult of Satanism in the United States. I remember one time they found a doll's head in a field and claimed that it was probably being used in some Satanic ritual. I was like 'well, yeah, or maybe it was just lost by some little kid.' All of the charges that have been leveled against Dungeons and Dragons, none of them have ever been substantiated, and most of them have been repudiated by mental health professionals and so forth. They're not much made any more because nobody can get much press out of it these days.

I think it was all rather cynical exploitation, like when people attack rock music when it's popular. I did see a TV evangelist that they had on the air, and he said right there in front of everybody that he knows for a fact that you can't be a rock and roll star without selling your soul to the devil. Then he showed where they were casting sorcerous spells… 'see that—he made that hand gesture. And now he's being possessed by a demon! See his face?' Of course if you contributed $15, he would send you books to warn you about all this.

Do you think some people do take role-playing too seriously?

I don't think any normal person does. Well, okay, there are people, sure. It's a human trait to overdo what you like to do. Some people eat too much. My favorite is the golfers who go out in the rain or in lightning storms. Quite a few of them get hit every year, and clearly they've taken a perfectly fine hobby to an extreme. They spend too much money and belong to a country club, they dress funny, and they play in the rain at the risk of their lives. In that regard, sure, there's people who play too many games.

That's why I try to stay away from computer games, because if I get started and I like it, I can just blow off weeks of time. I just don't want to do anything else but play that game.

I know that feeling.

[laughs] When I was first married, an IFW member—Martin Campion—did a game for SSI called Rails West! That you could play on an Apple computer. I started playing it and I loved it—I love railroad games, anyway. So I played it until Gail would say 'time to go to bed,' then I'd wait until she was asleep and go into the other room. That darn computer, whenever you'd take over another railroad line it would go 'beep beep beep.' And then she'd wake up and say 'it's three o'clock. You're going to stop playing that

damned game all the time or we're divorced.' And I wasn't doing any work, I was just staying up nights… I have sons who will do it now. I was just shouting at my son Alex yesterday about playing. I told him 'you're not doing your schoolwork, now shut off that stupid game!'

So it's real easy to overdo something. I don't even have Solitaire on my computer—I take everything off. That way I'm much more productive.

With regards to the occult criticisms, though, you have to admit that some of the Dungeons & Dragons materials were rather controversial. I'm thinking of the cover to Eldritch Wizardry…

Oh, yeah, that had the girl on the altar. Well, you don't know, maybe she was just passed out there or something. Actually a female artist did that, so who can complain?

Do you think that sort of imagery helped fuel the fire for people who viewed the game as an occult phenomenon?

Well, I don't know. I suppose that DePaul University—which is a Catholic school with the Blue Demons as a team—there are probably those people who are anti-Catholics who would point at that and say 'aha!' You can find any excuse that you want. There were some irate mothers, but take a look at some of the comic books or the old pulp magazines with the voluptuous ladies—the lovely scantily-clad woman out in space with a bug-eyed monster after her. Sure, that's somewhat lurid, but the guys love it. Those people who complain are never going to buy the damn game anyway, so give the guys what they want.

I hear people complaining these days saying 'well, there are too many scantily-clad females…' Well, females don't buy the game anyway. If they are and they're offended by it, use your colored pencils and dress them more tastefully. The game could use the sales of Playboy and Penthouse, and you need some good horrid demons. If you want to see something nasty, go look at Anne Rice novels. Oh boy. If you illustrated those novels, they'd be awfully racy. Sex and violence sells, and in role-playing games there really isn't much in the way of sexual innuendo in them, it's mostly just hack and slash and daring-do. So you want the fearsome monsters to fuel the fire, and throw a few good-looking girls on the cover so the players can say 'oh, yeah, that's what a girl looks like. Now back to the game.'

If there was some way of getting women to play the game, I'm sure every publisher would be delighted to change the games accordingly. As a biological determinant, I think men think differently than women do, and games are basically a male pursuit right across the board.

What did you think of the 2nd Edition rules?

I thought basically that most of what they did could have been done in a supplement like Unearthed Arcana, and made so that everybody didn't have to buy a whole bunch of new stuff for no particular reason. The skills were mishandled, I think. You have to watch it because if you go heavily on skills, they fall within the archetypical character class, and nothing meaningful much beyond them. You sort of lose the heroic questing and the archetypes in new Dungeons & Dragons, I'm afraid. 2nd Edition… well I

didn't like it as much as the original. Some people liked it better. They lost about half of their audience, though, when they came out with 2nd Edition. Someone who was there told me about that—he warned them about it, and they went ahead and did it anyway, and they lost about half of their players.

Do you think collectible card games had any effect on the popularity of role-playing games?

Sure. People were bored with what was coming out. Dungeons & Dragons has always been the major role-playing game. It's owned half of the audience, and when the 2nd Edition audience dropped, the whole of role-playing dropped. Nothing much good was coming out, so when Magic: The Gathering came out everybody said 'hooray! A new game to play.' Because their role-playing was the same old stuff, mostly. Then it sort of peaked, and for a few years I've been saying hey guys, role-playing isn't dead. It was in a doldrums, but the wind is picking up, and now we have the release of 3rd Edition. That's an action-packed game. It has some drawbacks, but I think it's going to bring in lots of new players. Meanwhile Magic peaked and leveled off, and now it's established itself as a classic, valid type of game.

Do you think computer games have affected role-playing games at all?

Oh, sure. Computer games are great for this reason: you can't really role-play on a computer—somebody always takes umbrage when I say that, but who are you playing a role to, when you're playing? It's not role-playing—it's semi-role-playing, and it's getting better all the time. Not to disparage them, because you can play whenever you want, for as long as you want. You can pause the game and come right back to where you were.

Certainly that has taken many of the older players, and young people too. I think many young people haven't been introduced to what I think is the finest, face-to-face form of role-playing because they're busy with the computer games. And some of the old guys haven't come back to group play because they can satisfy their gaming wants with computer games. So sure, it's definitely had impact on paper and pencil games.

I've said a few times in print that as I see things developing, I see the computer game of the future as the equivalent of the major motion picture. The Internet game is kind of like television. The face-to-face game is more like Broadway theater—the finest there is, but not as common. But there's nothing like the effect of the group interaction, you can't duplicate it. But I see all three forms of the game marching into the future and getting more popular. I don't think it's ever going to be too big—it's like chess and bridge. Not everyone plays chess, not everyone plays bridge, and not everyone role-plays. I do all three, if you give me that chance.

When did you officially leave TSR?

December 31, 1985.

How did that come about?

Brian and Kevin Blume had majority interesting in the company, and they said that I should go out and run Dungeons & Dragons Entertainment Company. It was then called TSR Entertainment. Well, I went out and found out that nobody on the coast liked the name 'TSR,' because they had some dealings with Kevin and Brian, so I changed the name of the company. I was co-producer for the Dungeons & Dragons cartoon series, and was working on various other projects, many of which were coming to fruition by the end of 1984—it takes a while to get established in the entertainment business, so they know that you aren't a civilian, but I had been out there for two years.

Then somebody called me from New York and told me that Kevin was shopping TSR on the Street, and they said 'you'd better get back, we're in trouble.' So I went back and did a quiet little bit of investigation into what was going on, and I wrote an eight or nine page report for the board of directors, which included three outside directors that the Blumes had appointed. One was the CEO of a medical supply company, one was an attorney for a large law firm in Milwaukee, and one was the director of personnel—human resources, in more politically correct terms—for the American Management Association, thankfully now defunct. I referred to them, generously, as Moe, Shemp, and Curly.

I said 'you guys have sat here and pontificated and voted with the Blumes, and ever since you've been on the board the company has been less and less profitable, and now we're a million and a half dollars in debt. You're talking about selling Dragon magazine, disbanding the RPGA, and doing various and sundry things, and this is clearly absolute mismanagement.' I demanded that Kevin Blume be removed as CEO of the company, and said that we should immediately take such measures as were necessary to get the company turned around.

Well, Brian had a fit and he said 'who's going to manage the company?' And I told him that he and I could do it, like we used to. He said 'no, I won't do that any more.' So in the end these jerks voted him off—they agreed with me, they couldn't do much else. They went out and hired some AMA schlump to run the company. I was Chairman of the Board, and I had an arm on them because I had the only group of investors, out in Los Angeles, who were willing to buy the company, and they thought that was going to happen.

They came in and did an audit, and we found out that there were something like 110 relatives of the Blumes on payroll. They all got fired, except one of them. They were getting paid more than anyone else, too. We had 60 or 70 leased and owned automobiles, most of which went back or were sold. We had systems furniture sufficient for 600 personnel—the company had about 300. About a million dollars, at least, in systems furniture. All the execs deferred about half their salaries for a while, and I didn't take any of my royalty payments.

I immediately put together Unearthed Arcana, and between that and Oriental Adventures, well, that was

all it took to turn the company around. But the Blumes were really angry at me, and they wanted me to buy their stock at some ridiculous number, and I said no. They were so furious to me that they sold to someone that I had hired into the company to help turn it around in what I think to this day was an illegal transfer—it violated the buy/sell agreement that we had. But I lost the court case.

At that point I said "fuck it. I'm so sick of the way this company is being run." When I was managing the company, for example, we did the most expensive bindings that we could for our books. The old Dungeons & Dragons books don't fall apart. They were all schoolbook covers, McCain stitched on the side. The Blumes dropped that because we made an extra dime per copy. I told them 'you're screwing the gamers,' but they just didn't care. They were in it for the money, and I was just in it to provide good games. Even so, when I was running the company, we had a lower overhead and a higher profit margin than they had ever since. They certainly sold more books, but they were never as profitable. I think a lot of the spirit was lot, which is why most of the classic stuff came out when there were real gamers who loved gaming in there, not just people trying to make a buck off other people.

So I said "screw it, I'm out of here. Buy out my stock, buy out my interest, I'm gone." And we concluded the deal on December 31, 1985.

Is that when Lorraine Williams took over the company?

Uh-huh. She did. And I think it took her… hmm, when did she finally sell to Wizards?

That was in 1997.

Right. At that point TSR had run up a debt of $26.5 million secured, and lord knows how much unsecured. So she was even better than the Blumes at running the company into the ground.

There were rumors that she didn't hold gamers in very high esteem.

No, she said openly that they were socially her inferiors. She did announce that she was going to show the other companies how to properly run a business, which I thought was ironic. I don't think we'll ever hear about her in gaming again. How anyone could keep the company's doors open as long as they were was beyond me.

Did Brian Blume really state that he wanted 'obscene profits at Federally insured safety?'

Absolutely, he did. He said that while we were at 723 Williams St., and he was standing there and there were a bunch of employees there, and he said 'I want obscene profits at Federally insured safety.' That's when I was complaining about the Dieties and Demigods book, when he took out the Cthulhu and the Melnibonean mythos. The Melnibonean stuff came out simply because he refused to plug any other company. He said 'I won't plug Chaosium's stuff.' We had permission from Michael Moorcock to do that. Unbeknownst to him, of course, his agent had licensed the books to Chaosium, but I had the letter from

Michael, and I had plugged Michael's stuff for free for a long time because I really liked it. He thanked me at a DragonCon in 1994 for doubling his readership.

When Brian pulled those two out of the book, I said 'well, we'd better come up with something to replace them.' And Brian said 'nah, who cares.'

In fact the main reason that Lorraine Williams was against me was that I had told her that when we pulled out of this, I wanted to reward all the people who had been working hard, and I thought they should all get shares of stock, and I thought all the creative people should be getting a royalty-like payment. And she said 'over my dead body.' I think we would have run a profitable company that way, but she didn't.

Are you glad that you got out when you did?

Oh, yeah. The way that the Blumes were running things disturbed me greatly, and I was the face of the company. It was often very difficult, because everyone thought I owned it and ran it. I owned 30% of it, and did as I was told after 1981. The company restructured then, and if you ever get a chance to see the annual report that was published… we were the company with three presidents. There was a board of directors, that directs the officers. That consisted of Brian, Kevin, and myself. I was the President, and then under me were two Presidents—the President of Creative, Brian Blume, and the President of Operations, Kevin Blume. So I could tell them something, and if they didn't do it I could speak to the board about it. [laughs] It was a classic box. They wanted to run the company because they thought they could do better, and that's why I ended up out on the West coast. I had a great time out there, so I can't complain.

After you left, you went on to do Dangerous Journeys…

Yes. Lorraine didn't like that, so she sued me.

For what?

Oh, they said it was infringing on the copyrights of Dungeons & Dragons. It was a bogus suit, but they spent us out of court. We had to go into settlement negotiations because of the cost of the whole thing. We'd spent a half-million dollars already; they probably spent a million and a half or two, which they couldn't afford. I had to laugh, because that was probably the straw that broke the camel's back, because after that TSR went right down the tubes. In the settlement they paid a bunch of money, all of which I didn't collect.

And they got the rights to the game from Game Designer's Workshop?

Yeah, they bought out GDW's inventory, and paid for that. Paid some money to us—they were paying

yearly installments. I was here in town, and I was at the local liquor store buying a bottle of gin or something, and I bumped into a lady there who said 'damn, Gary, we sure miss you. You know what those son-of-a-bitches have done now?' And I said 'no, what?' She said 'well, Lorraine says that we're all moving—she's sold the building to the printer. And she sold the accounting department too.' She'd sold both the building and the accounting department to the printer.

I told Gail 'TSR has just sold the only asset they had that wasn't pledged to a bank. They're going under in no time.' Sure enough, three months later Peter Adkison was in town seeing me and doing the negotiation to buy them.

Do you think the Wizards of the Coast acquisition was a good thing for Dungeons & Dragons?

Oh, you bet. I don't know how close it was—I wasn't privy to that information—but they couldn't have been more than a month away from forced bankruptcy. That would have been a disaster for role-playing. Just a disaster.

Did they start work on the 3rd Edition right away?

Yeah, they did almost immediately. It took them a while. Had I done, I could have finished it in half the time that it took three or four guys, but when you work by committee things get slow.

Did you have any involvement in the design process?

No, not really. I did a review and critique for them prior to release, though.

What do you think of the 3rd Edition?

Is it an improvement over original Dungeons & Dragons? I don't know—I don't think so. A whole different game? Yes.

I love the Dungeon Master's Guide—it's basically a tutorial on how to do a dungeon crawl. As I read that I said 'whew, all this stuff I'd forgotten.' It's definitely aimed at action and rapid advancement. It's a game made to bring in new young players that want to do slam-bang hack and slash, and it's good at it. My sons Ernie and Luke are working on a d20 adventure right now, and I've seen parts of it in play, and I'll probably contribute a few fun ideas. Boy, how they love it—they're having such a good time. It's going to breathe some new life into gaming.

You're doing some writing for Dragon magazine now, right?

I have a regular column there.

Any plans to do any other work for Wizards?

I don't know, now that Peter's gone. Peter wanted to do sort of a Dungeon Master's how-to book with me, but now that Peter's gone I doubt that will happen. One of the things that I was approached about by the Role-Playing Game Association, they wanted me to do the original Greyhawk castle and dungeons. But that would require the co-authorship of Rob Kuntz. I'm so busy right now… it's a huge project. And Rob isn't interested in signing a non-disclosure agreement with my company. So I don't think we'll get too far there. Also, if I do design work like that, I expect royalty payments with advances, and I don't think the RPGA wants to do that.

What do you think of BioWare's upcoming game, Neverwinter Nights?

I've though all along that any game—massively multiplayer or anything where you go online—is going to do well if it's well done. You've got an ever-growing audience of people. I can't tell you how many times my game group is busy. Now that they're older, well, one's off to college, and one has to work nights, and so on. You are going to run into that sort of stuff online, but not nearly as badly as when you try to physically bring someone into one location.

And I like the idea. I love computer games too, and I think they've got great futures. I'm looking forward to the time when you have video and audio hookups on your computer—when that comes standard. I've been a fan of the computer for role-playing since before the Internet. You can do all your spectacular stuff, all your effects and cinematics and maps and such. I was always trying to get TSR to get more involved in that.

When Tomb of Horrors was popular, it was because of the bad—we couldn't really afford anything better—illustrations. 'Here's what you see,' and so forth. Of course because I liked it and wanted to do more of that, well, the Expedition to the Barrier Peaks had some of that, but after that they dropped the whole idea. Just simply because I liked it. Then instead of doing role-playing on the computer, they did Fight in the Skies, in their abortive attempt to get into computer games.

I use my computer only as a tool to write… well, and answer email. And play games, when I get a chance. I love them.